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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the function of cooperation between parents and teachers, the needs of teachers and parents regarding cooperation, and the quality and form of cooperation that is most satisfactory to parents and teachers. Discussions generated by the investigation indicated that parents entertained widely differing opinions about school and its function. Parental attitudes toward cooperation were found to be governed by views concerning the function of schools in relation to their aspirations regarding their children's long-term education. The parent-teacher relationship is often vague concerning expectations and norms, leading to conflicts between teachers and parents and teachers and children. It was found that parental contact with the school was highest when the child entered school and decreased as the child progressed to the upper grades. Parental cooperation with the school was found to be most intense on the part of middle class families. This study is incomplete and a comprehensive survey is underway examining the attitudes of working class parents toward the school and cooperation with teachers. (JD)

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Background

Section 1 of the Education Act lays down that schools, acting ".... in co-operation with homes, are to promote the pupils' development into happy individuals and competent and responsible citizens".

The 1969 Elementary School Curriculum stresses that the acquisition of knowledge must be viewed in relation to the pupil's social and personal development. The new Curriculum places even more emphases on the formative function of schooling, and in this connection it attaches increased importance to co-operation with parents.

Research into the teaching process has shown that the acquisition of knowledge is to a great extent dependent on previous experience and conceptual development. Pre-school attendance and the changing role of the family are transforming the terms on which children can assimilate school instruction. Co-operation with families and pre-school institutions is therefore particularly important.

In keeping with the democratization of the various sectors of social life, parents should be considered entitled to exert a greater measure of influence on their children's schooling. More and more parents are demanding participation and influence in connection with school activities.

Research in recent years has shown that schools have not acquired the egalitarian role envisaged in the reforms which have been underway in the Swedish school system for a couple of decades. The long-term effects of education are to a great extent governed by the social background of the pupil. The function of education for children from different social groupings is reflected in the relationship between home and school. A closer knowledge of that

relationship can shed light on the role of school in a wider context.

Purpose of the project

The original purpose of the POSLEF project was to study the relevance of co-operation with homes to the teaching situation as a means of giving the teacher a comprehensive understanding of the individual child and of making the learning situation more meaningful by relating it to family and pre-school experience.

It gradually became clear that this approach was too narrow, and the field of reference was therefore widened to include more basic topics of inquiry such as the following:

What function does co-operation possess for teachers?
And for parents?

What are the respective needs of teachers and parents regarding co-operation?

What form of co-operation is most satisfying (desirable) to teachers and parents respectively?

What at present is the content of co-operation, and what would teachers and parents respectively like that content to be?

One special aim of the project is to study contacts and information between homes, school and pre-school when children start school.

Project activities

Retrospect

The project began with a description of the attitude towards home

and school relations as expressed in official documents during the period of reform from the 1940s onwards. Briefly, the following transpired.

Traditionally, contacts between homes and schools have been concerned with outreach activities and supervision. When corporal punishment in schools was prohibited in 1958, teachers incurred a statutory obligation to contact parents in connection with persistent misconduct by a pupil at school.

In the light of investigations in about 1960 concerning the connection between parental attitudes and children's educational achievement, attention was drawn in the 1962 and 1969 curricula to the importance of closer contacts between homes and schools. The main emphasis here was on information activities, and parents were regarded as a target for information and conditioning. The 1969 curriculum stresses that information between teachers and parents must proceed in both directions and that pedagogical questions must be discussed by the two sides.

Parental entitlement to exert influence is stressed in the report of the SIA Commission, which proposes statutory parental rights including, for example, representation in a local governing body and entitlement to leave of absence in order to visit their children's schools. None of these proposals became law.

A new investigatory report (Co-determination in schools) presented by the Ministry of Education proposes the adoption of rules to give both parents and children greater powers of co-determination in schools. The report also proposes the establishment of a local joint governing body.

This report has been circulated for comment, and it has transpired during the circulation process that the teachers' unions are particularly averse to the proposals.

Thus, unlike their counterparts in most other countries, parents in Sweden are not formally entitled to influence school activities.

Despite a realization of the important bearing of factors in the home environment on the child's ability to avail himself of the school's resources, relatively little research has been devoted to problems concerning co-operation between homes and schools. Research in this field has come low on the list of priorities in connection with reforms of the school system.

A review has been presented of previous investigations, and the conclusions arrived at have included the following:

Only a few surveys have been reported on the subject of co-operation between homes and schools.

Contacts between teachers and parents are most numerous at junior level and least numerous at senior level.

The higher the grade of elementary school, the worse the teacher feels contacts with the pupils' homes to be.

Certain teachers are very conscious of "pressure" from the pupils' homes and therefore often feel obliged to give priority to tests and homework. Other teachers do not experience this pressure.

Most teachers would like to have more contacts with parents.

In one survey, only half the participating teachers professed to be familiar with the official guidelines for contacts between homes and schools.

Most teachers feel that liaison activities should be included in teacher training.

The mothers of children starting school do not know enough about schools.

The findings thus reported from previous research showed that the forms of co-operation had been charted relatively well but knowledge concerning the content and function of co-operation was incomplete. Experience also suggested that desires for and efforts towards better co-operation did not produce the intended results, so that closer research analysis was urgently needed of motives for and needs of co-operation among both teachers and parents.

Experimental activities

After inquiries concerning interest in co-operation between home and schools had been addressed to all school management districts in Gothenburg, a suburban area with a predominantly working class population was selected as an experimental area. This district comprised four schools with junior and intermediate level grades. One group of teachers in the district had already evinced interest in experimental activities.

In order to study the function and content of co-operation more closely, the experimentation started with a more detailed identification of the concrete experiences of teachers and parents on the subject of co-operation. This was done by means of group discussions. A joint group considered co-operation from the viewpoints of both teachers and parents, and this revealed contradictions regarding goals and content. These discussions were fed back in modified form to the participants, and in this way the discussion was made to focus on the problem fields which had been most conspicuous.

The content of the group discussions has been presented in a report (POSLEF 2) giving teachers' and parents' views on the following topics.

1. School organization and functions, e.g. the time available for co-operation, teachers' experience of criticism, teaching content, the introduction of new methods, the evaluation of knowledge and other achieve-

ments, discipline, the demands posed by schools, the information supplied to parents.

2. Relations between homes and schools, e.g. difficulties in making contact, ways of solving problems concerning individual pupils, parents who "don't care about their children", the function of parents in school, whether schools or parents should bring up children, standards and responsibilities.
3. Forms of contact, e.g. the role of the local branch of the School and Home Union, difficulties in making the class meeting meaningful, ways in which parents can help at school, the content of private interviews, classroom visits, alternative forms of co-operation.

Analysis of the group discussions showed that parents entertained widely differing opinions about school and its function. Parental attitudes to co-operation were found to be governed by parental views concerning the function of schools in relation to their aspirations regarding their children's long-term education. Information and knowledge about schools vary, and so too, consequently, does the parental sense of responsibility for a child's school work and adjustment to the school community. The parent-teacher relationship often involves a vagueness concerning expectations and norms which can lead to conflicts between teachers and parents and between teachers and children.

The attitude taken by teachers towards co-operation is governed by their view of the parental role in relation to instruction. Problems of co-operation were mainly concerned with the following:

1. Ways of getting in touch with all parents.
2. Questions surrounding information.

3. Norms and requirements.
4. Problem pupils.

The group discussions led to a concretization of plans for testing different forms of co-operation. A development work model was constructed by the project team together with the teachers and parents who had taken part in the group activities and presented to all the teachers in the experimental area. Active efforts were made, in collaboration with the local branch of the Home and School Union, to launch development work - for example, through the formation of "working parties" of teachers and parents. No experimental activities materialized.

A questionnaire survey was conducted among the teachers in the experimental area to find out why most of them were uninterested in taking part in co-operation between homes and schools. Group interviews of class teachers were planned at the same time. Only a few of the teachers attended the group interviews, and 60 per cent of the teachers completed the questionnaires. The replies bore witness to great variations between individual teachers on the subject of co-operation with homes.

According to the teachers, a large percentage of parents attend class meetings and fifteen-minute interviews. Some teachers frequently had visitors in their classrooms. A comparison with other investigations showed that parental participation in the traditional forms of contact was relatively high in this area.

Since only a few teachers took part in the group interviews, teacher attitudes towards co-operation could not be analysed more closely.

The development work experiment has been described and analysed in a separate report.

Some of the teachers queried parental desire for and interest in participation.

Previous surveys have shown parental "pressure" to be particularly acute in middle class areas.

We asked ourselves: What are the opportunities and needs of working class parents regarding co-operation with schools?

A comprehensive questionnaire was constructed in order to analyse more closely the background to parental needs and opportunities regarding co-operation with schools. Questions were asked concerning the working situation of parents, their attitudes towards schools and education, their present numbers of contacts with school, the nature and content of those contacts, and desires for other contacts and influence. The questionnaires were distributed to the parents of all pupils in the district, representing about 500 families in all. Collection of the replies was impeded by the fact that the questionnaire study coincided with a teacher strike in the Municipality of Gothenburg, but replies were received from 73 per cent of the parents. These replies are now undergoing computer processing and a report should appear during the spring term 1981.

Parental participation when children start school

In the course of the project, attention has also been paid to problems concerning parental contacts when children start school. A model concerning information to first-time pupils and their parents, entitled "Spring Meeting", has been on trial in the experimental area for a number of years. Parents and their children are invited to visit the school for a whole day at the end of the spring term. The children are given the opportunity of taking part in classroom activities and eating in the dining hall, while their parents meet and talk to school staff in small groups. About 90 per cent of the parents concerned actually participate in these Spring Meetings. The experiment has been evaluated in connection with a more comprehensive survey of parental attitudes to the commencement of their children's schooling. About 400 parents in three districts with different social structures have an-

swered questions about problems they experienced when their children changed from pre-school education to elementary school, and about information needs, experience of the information supplied, contacts with school staff, contacts desired, attitudes towards school and pre-school activities respectively, and their opinions concerning the extent to which they are personally able to influence their children's school situation.

Preliminary findings suggest that the Spring Meeting attracted more participants and was more positively received by parents than the traditional type of information. The information supplied via contacts of the traditional kind was felt to be unsatisfactory. The problems experienced varied from one district to another. What the participants in the Spring Meeting most appreciated was that they had been informed about ways in which, as parents, they could help their children and about the resources available at school. Half of all the parents stated that they intended joining a parents' circle in the event of one being organized. Attitudes concerning what was most important at school and in pre-school education respectively varied from one district to another.

The findings will be summarized in a separate report during the autumn of 1980.

Reports published

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